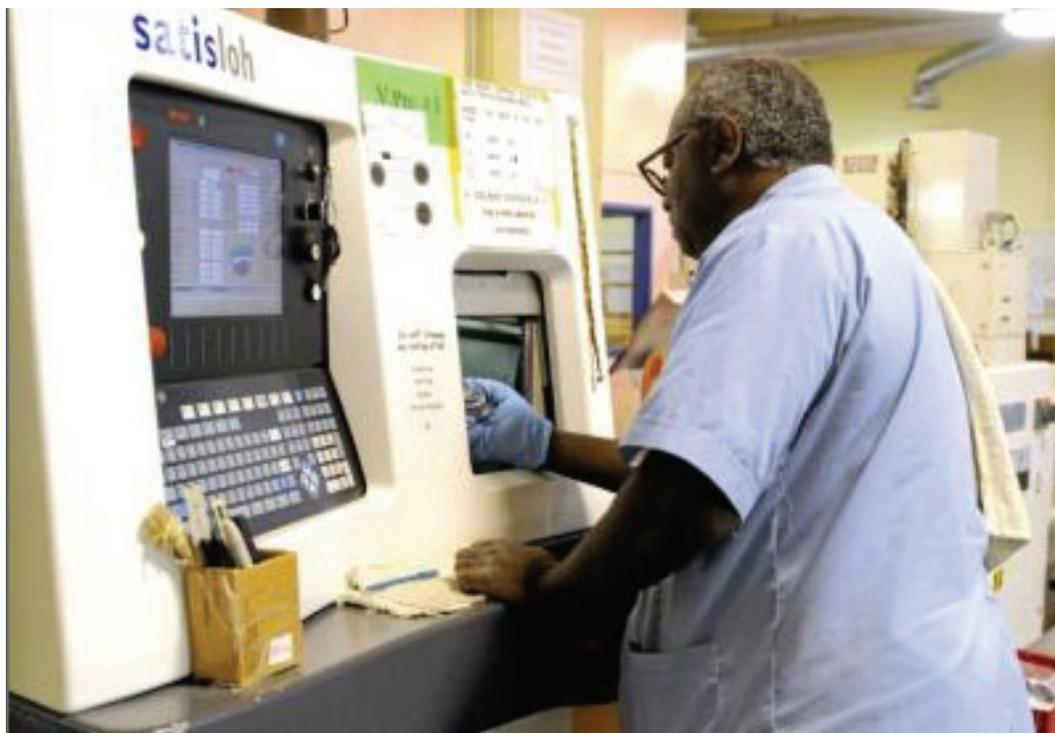


Vacaville inmates help others see clearly through work at optics lab

Inmates help others see clearly through work at optics lab



Alten Sullivan mans his station at the wax blocker Wednesday afternoon — just one step in the production at CSP-Solano’s CALPIA-run optical lab, which makes eyeglasses for both the state and Medical.

By Catherine Mijs
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While work may feel like drudgery to many, to Rodger Hill it is an escape.

Hill, an inmate at CSP-Solano in Vacaville, says walking into the prison’s optical lab every morning provides him with not only a sense of normalcy, but a brief reprieve from life on the line.

Tucked away inside three levels of fencing — two complete with menacing-looking razor wire — the elaborate optical lab is equipped to complete up to 1,000 jobs per day and makes eye wear for both the state and Medi-Cal, said Patricia Ackman, the lab’s superintendent.

Amid the hum of machinery and the bustle of the 82 inmate workers assigned to the California Prison Industry Authority-run program (CALPIA), Hill, and other inmates like him, have found a way to give back.

“I was looking for a change, something different. And they told me this is a program to invest yourself (in),” said Hill, a Santa Rosa native who has been in prison for the past 32 years after being convicted of murder.

“I basically reeducated myself,” he continued.

A former construction worker, Hill said he didn’t know anything about making glasses. Now, after ongoing training, the 57-year-old is American Board of Ophthalmology (ABO) certified, optical certified and a customer service specialist and works as the lab’s lead man or shop foreman.

“I learned everything in this program that I could,” he added.

Hill started working in the lab in 1991 — the same year that it was opened.

“I had been blinded twice by welding, so my vision became important to me,” he said. “So I wanted to learn how this was done.

“Fortunately for me, I was able to work in the program, get all my certifications, recertify as needed to get where I am today,” Hill said.

Before the process begins, a doctor’s prescription order is stripped of any of the patient’s personal information in the lab’s annex, where Lt. Marlaina Dernoncourt, public information officer for CSP-Solano, began her career, before moving on to the inmate workforce.

The circular manufacturing process has its beginning and end in the same room, and incorporates steps from data entry to frame tracing all the way down to generating and grinding the lenses until they are fitted into their frames and mailed out; Each inmate working their station enthusiastic about their role in the process.

“At every stage we do our quality control,” Akman said.

“Once we marry the job to the number, it talks to the rest of the machines by a scanning mechanism,” she explained.

According to Dernoncourt, the lab’s No. 1 account is making eye glasses for children who couldn’t otherwise afford them.

“What’s great about all CALPIA programs is it reduces recidivism, it increases public safety in the communities and it saves the state money,” said spokeswoman Michele Kane.

With the day starting around 6:45 a.m. and continuing until 2:30 p.m., Kane said the lab, like other CALPIA programs is invaluable, not only in the skills that it teaches the inmates, but in the use of free time — which often equates directly to reductions in prison violence.



Inmate Daniel Wilkins performs final inspections on a pair of eye-glasses that are press of the assembly line of the prison’s CALPIA-run optical laboratory at CSP-Solano.

In general, inmates working in CALPIA programs are 26-38 percent less likely to reoffend than average CDCR inmates, who have an average recidivism rate of 61 percent, Kane noted.

According to Prison Industries Administrator Mark Stewart, the process of being hired by CALPIA, which is one of the most sought after prison employers, is like any other business: you apply and give a list of qualifications and the top candidates are hired.

“It’s just as much what you can do for CALPIA as what CALPIA can do for you,” he added.

Since coming to work at the lab 14 years ago, inmate Roy Rodriguez has made it his mission to learn as much about the world of optics as possible.

“I actually started off as a porter,” said Rodriguez, 52, who said he ran into an advanced optician and master optician who encouraged him to try his hand at the lab.

“I started learning it and I started enjoying it, then I started working in the specialty department and started making glasses for children,” Rodriguez said.

For Rodriguez, his greatest inspiration is the ability to give back — even while behind bars.

“Some of these eye prescriptions for children where they can’t see their parents or anything, that’s when I started saying, ‘Yeah, I’m really helping out there,’” he said. “In fact, we’re doing (a prescription) right now for a small child ... Hopefully when we finish, he’ll be able to see his parents and brothers and sisters.”

Both Rodriguez and Hill agree that the work is actually pretty fun, once you get into the rhythm.

“This takes you away from prison,” Hill said. “Down in the yard is prison, you come up here, this is your job and it’s completely different. We’re very fortunate to have the staff we have. I’ve had four our five different superintendents and they’ve all treated me like a human being.”



Roy Rodriguez, an inmate at CSP-Solano in Vacaville, shows off a pair of specially made glasses inside the prison’s optical lab.